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and the
Little Red Harpsichord

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le petit clavecin rouge

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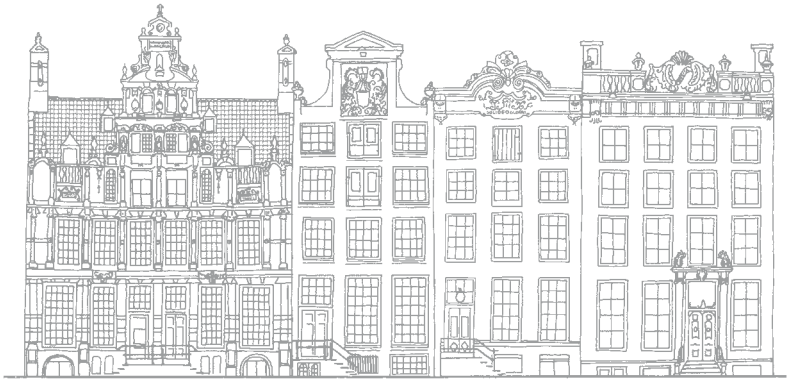


The key to studying with Gustav Leonhardt was always preparation. What an audience for the solo harpsichord literature, especially for a young performer! It is not my studies with Leonhardt which prepared me for my work, but the preparation it required to perform at my best week after week, and the process of watching the master himself work. Bach, Scarlatti, Frescobaldi, Froberger, Byrd, Gibbons, Sweelinck, Morley, Farnaby, Tomkins, the Couperins, Forqueray, d'Anglebert, Marchand and Duphly all had to be represented, but always with new works – nothing was ever played twice.

Leonhardt and I met briefly for the first time in 1976, after a concert that was the first I had heard him play. On the all-Bach program, he included his own transcriptions of two of the solo violin Partitas. I was instantly persuaded that he had the answers to many of my questions. I subsequently played for him in a series of masterclasses in the United States in 1979, and was accepted for study in Amsterdam.

Meanwhile, I continued all my practicing, research into performance practice, reading, delving into the construction of

historic harpsichords and other instruments, building a library, visiting instrument collections to play original harpsichords in the United States and Europe, and wondered what this fascinating musician called Leonhardt would be like as a teacher and as a person. At lunch during the 1979 masterclasses, we talked about French repertoire and French harpsichords, and he produced an already travel-weary photograph of his new acquisition – which he referred to as "my little red harpsichord." The fact that he was carrying a photo of a seventeenth-century French style harpsichord – in his wallet, to my astonishment – is I think the thing that made us understand that we shared an uncommon love for the harpsichord. In any case, this small gesture on his part is the one that always made me feel at ease with Leonhardt, and considering his outward appearance as the harpsichord's inaccessible gentleman, this small incident was extraordinary.

I learned a bit more about Leonhardt's history, attempting to determine how he had to work in order to get across his personal message. It was clear that postwar Vienna, where Leonhardt lived in the mid-1950s, was not the place for a rebel: the wrong place at the wrong time. Had Gustav Leonhardt not had, in addition to his talent, a keen interest in the works of Bach, his superb gentlemanly manners and a rather regal bearing, he may have not succeeded. "Old" instruments already had enough place in the music world of that era: the ugly German production harpsichord, incapable of nuance and therefore praised by dry, stiff musicians, energetic critics and idle commentators who would not abide expression; and the factory-made recorder, an instrument "easy to play" and that would keep the "quaint" repertoire of earlier centuries on an amateur level and where it belonged: out of the concert hall.

The intellectualized thought on musical style and performance, particularly for Baroque music, which ran rampant in centers such as Vienna, had to be ignored. Baroque repertoire is only faithfully represented when melody, harmony and rhythm are joined by the fourth member of the Baroque musical quadrivium: Rhetoric. So, what is Rhetoric? It is the result of melody and harmony being considered together (text, of course, forming a part of melody in vocal music), and combined with rhythmic gestures that are

improvisatory in nature. The music then gains clarity and relief, rather than confusion that is engendered by focusing on the similarity of quite different elements of musical expression. Leonhardt was aware of all this, and was without doubt the first musician of his distinction, working on traditional-style instruments, to consider these problems of interpretation to musical ends.

And he found solutions. Leonhardt, with his extraordinary eye for the abundant virtuosity of Baroque visual art, drew part of his inspiration from the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century craftsman-artists who were not musicians. He began to understand certain concepts of Baroque art that musicologists, critics and commentators could not even begin to approach.

Amsterdam, where Leonhardt returned to live, did not have a staid atmosphere. He formed the Leonhardt Consort: five strings and harpsichord or organ (unless he played, in his beloved English consort music in six parts, the bass viol). With performances throughout Europe, solo tours of America and recordings in worldwide circulation, a new musical life was beginning for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music, not only for the harpsichord but for chamber and orchestral repertoire as well. The 'cellist of the Leonhardt Consort remarked that he wrote to everyone in the group, with repertoire details, rehearsal schedules, train departure times: no secretaries, no sponsorship, just music making at the highest level and the cultivation of an appreciative public.

For a lesson with Leonhardt, one rang the doorbell at a very imposing and architecturally important canal house in the center of Amsterdam. One was admitted; Leonhardt stood at the end of an infinitely long hallway that led into the garden part of the house and a large reception room. In this reception room stood three harpsichords: A William Dowd made in Paris after Blanchet, a Martin Skowroneck after Dulcken, and a Skowroneck Flemish virginal. Everything had the order of a patrician house of the eighteenth-century.

I was welcomed. I sat at the harpsichord, while Leonhardt installed himself in a comfortable chair, a little in the shadow,

where he was prepared to sit for an hour or an hour and a half, with frequent excursions to the harpsichord. A clock ticked; I remembered the wallet-sized photo of the red harpsichord. Certain that he would rather be entertained than bored, my method was to play exactly as I felt like playing. It seemed to me a waste of his time and mine to attempt an artificial performance of any sort. Leonhardt would be the first to admit that faithfulness to a composer, his style or his score is irrelevant without confidence in one's own individual interpretation. This is in fact what Leonhardt taught me: self confidence. He built this inner confidence in a variety of subtle means (*cachant l'art par l'art…*); with the wisdom necessary to recognize that, even with a confident musical personality, one must always continue to build in order to play better. What is special about the time he afforded me is that the tradition was passed on by example and demonstration, not by discussion and intellectual exercise. This is the pre-twentieth-century manner of teaching a living tradition, and since Leonhardt is the person who revived it, I felt that, for once, I was in the right place at the right time.

Lessons were only one thing. The master - student involvement in the pre-twentieth-century manner of teaching also involved daily experiences relative to the craft of art. I even learned to record from Leonhardt. He asked me to turn pages for a recording, and I immediately accepted with great excitement. I had never been to a recording session (I would not record until several years later), and thought that one with Leonhardt would be especially illuminating. The experience was fascinating, as Leonhardt had made over 200 recordings. Leonhardt performed non-stop. I heard many concerts in Holland, on both harpsichord and organ. During this time, the great organ of Amsterdam's Nieuwe Kerk was being restored. It is a particularly stunning thing, as it is on of the largest Baroque organs in Northern Europe: the four large painted shutters open, the sight is one of the more splendid in the world, and then music comes out. Listening to Leonhardt play this organ many times, I always thought that this grand and great noise of the full instrument must have been the loudest and most splendid sounds of the seventeenth-century. Of course, it was one of Leonhardt's talents to get the maximum out of any instrument he was playing, and nothing inspired him quite like a great harpsichord or organ.

He was very excited about the restoration and played a series of dedication recitals on the instrument.

Performing, recording, and even tuning. For a concert in Amsterdam's Oude Kerk, where Sweelinck was organist, Leonhardt once asked me to help him tune the organ. Walking from home, he had a particular route of walking to this church through the streets of the oldest part of Amsterdam, revealing its most beautiful and remarkable architecture, if avoiding some of the more colorful tourist attractions of the Red Light district. As Leonhardt crawled around high in the organ case, tuning the reeds, I gave notes on the keyboards, confirming whether we were right on target or not. And I do remember the cold: Sweelinck's. Amsterdam's Golden Age would be incomplete without a visit to a tavern, so we stopped to refresh the spirit and to warm ourselves with sherry.

It was these moments with Leonhardt that were as good as the lessons. If one wants to understand a particular composer or style, one gets as close as possible to that composer or that style. If one wants to understand a particular interpreter, it is very much the same. Leonhardt's burning desire to get closer to Purcell, his English contemporaries and language inspired him to meet Alfred Deller in the 1950s. The result of this fruitful collaboration was a great friendship, with concerts and recordings together. I once asked Leonhardt if he had ever let anyone tell him how to do something. Without any hesitation, he answered, "Only Deller".

Lessons with Leonhardt generally ended with conversation, avoiding the subject of music, and sometimes accompanied by tea and the presence of Marie Leonhardt. There, for once, we could talk about violins instead of harpsichords! We managed to speak rarely about other musicians, touching sometimes on Landowska and Kirkpatrick but avoiding the current scene. But for Leonhardt, when work was over, it was time to relax and refresh, which was often accomplished in the company of the latest catalogues of the world's great salesrooms, or, on occasion, the current Alfa Romeo brochure.

After one of my last lessons, I asked Leonhardt to show me the "little red harpsichord" from the wallet-sized photo I had seen

years before. This referred to a sumptuously decorated red lacquer and chinoiserie harpsichord made by Martin Skowroneck and based on the seventeenth-century Parisian maker Vaudry. On the spur of the moment, he went up the stairs, opened the harpsichord and tuned with impressive care. There it stood, superb, tucked away in a corner of a small but opulent room. Knowing my special love for seventeenth-century French harpsichord music, Leonhardt played for me on this magical instrument for quite a long time: improvisation, snatches of Louis Couperin, Froberger, d'Anglebert.

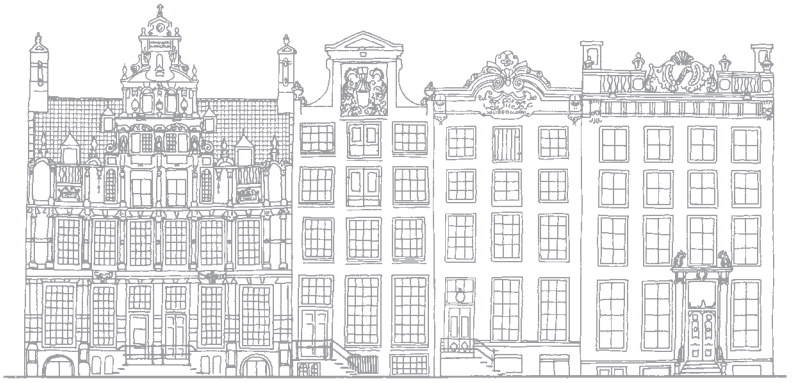
This completely informal performance, free of all worldly cares and totally outside the public domain, unlocked the doors once and for all. It is how Bach played for his sons and pupils, it is how Frescobaldi played for Froberger, it is how Blancrocher played for Louis Couperin. The secret touch, the completely unique and relatively secret method of real virtuosity on the harpsichord, was revealed. It is the greatest gift one could imagine from a fellow harpsichord player. I return frequently to this memory, as Gustav Leonhardt, just yesterday, in the dim rays of late afternoon, played his "little red harpsichord".

Skip Sempé, 1995

From Paradizo's forthcoming publication of Skip Sempé's Essays on Music and Performance.

Photos: Marco Borggreve (cover) / Dieter Thomsen

Gustav Leonhardt et le petit clavecin rouge



Le secret des études avec Gustav Leonhardt était toujours la préparation. Quel auditeur pour la littérature de clavecin, surtout jouée par un jeune interprète ! Ce ne sont pas mes études avec Leonhardt qui m'ont formé à mon métier, mais l'indispensable préparation pour jouer le mieux possible semaine après semaine, et la possibilité d'observer le maître lui-même au travail. Bach, Scarlatti, Frescobaldi, Froberger, Byrd, Gibbons, Sweelinck, Morley, Farnaby, Tomkins, les Couperin, Forqueray, d'Anglebert, Marchand et Duphly devaient tous être représentés, mais toujours avec de nouvelles pièces – on ne jouait jamais rien deux fois.

J'ai rencontré Leonhardt pour la première fois, brièvement, en 1976, après un concert – le premier où je l'entendais jouer. Dans le programme entièrement consacré à Bach, il avait fait figurer ses propres transcriptions de deux des partitas pour violon seul. J'ai aussitôt été convaincu qu'il avait les réponses à bon nombre de mes questions. J'ai ensuite joué pour lui lors d'une série de master-classes aux États-Unis en 1979, et été accepté comme élève à Amsterdam.

Entre-temps, je continuais à travailler mon instrument, à faire mes recherches sur les principes d'exécution, à lire, à m'intéresser à la